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*French Flute Music
between 1935 and
1955: Varèse,
Messiaen and Jolivet*

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Preface

This study originated in my interest from the perception of twentieth century music, particularly the flute music of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), Edgard Varèse (1883-1965) and André Jolivet (1905-1974). I imagined that the studies already done on these composers would provide me with an analytical and historical view of their works and lives. Early in my study it became apparent that very little study had been completed on André Jolivet in general. There are also only small amounts written on the individual works that I have chosen to study by the selected composers. The main works that I am concentrating on are *Density 21.5* by Debussy, *Le merle noir* by Messiaen and Jolivet's *Cinq Incantations*. When reading this thesis it must be remember that, although Varèse was born in France, he emigrated to America in 1915 when he was thirty-two and *Density 21.5* was not written till 1936 so can be classed as part American. *Le merle noir* by Messiaen is also written for flute and piano whereas the other works are for flute alone.

This thesis will consist of three parts, or approaches to the flute music of Messiaen, Varèse and Jolivet. The first part considers a more general view of the solo flute and how, over time, the music written for flute has moved away from the orchestra and become more experimental, not only for the performer but also the listener. I will move through centuries and look at how different composers had various approaches and opinions of the flute. The second part of this thesis looks at Stravinsky and Debussy as the main influences for the writings of Messiaen, Varèse and Jolivet. It will look at the individual works that I am studying and try to establish what, if anything, they have in common. The last part is an analysis of Varèse's *Density 21.5*, Messiaen's *Le merle noir* and Jolivet's *Cinq Incantations*. In conclusion to this section I will look at comparisons that these pieces have before writing a full conclusion of this thesis.

The Traditions of the Solo Flute in France

France set the cultural fashions for the rest of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries so that woodwind, and increasingly flute, music would be appreciated at the French court. In turn this had important consequences for countries and musicians all over Europe and indeed the rest of the world. Mainly the composer Lully started this new French innovation in 1678 when he scored the flute into his ballet *Le triomphe de l'Amour* although developments out of the eyes of the public had been going on for centuries before this major emergence into the public. Almost a century after Lully's composition, Sir John Hawkins wrote 'The German or transverse flute still retains some degree of estimation among gentlemen whose ears are not nice enough to inform them that it is never in tune'.¹ Moving briefly away from France, at the same time as this statement was released, Mozart was at the peak of his composition. Mozart backs up the statement by Hawkins as he is reputed to have disliked the flute, the main reason being for its unreliability of its intonation, yet he still wrote on of his most famous operas based on the flute. *The Magic Flute* therefore tells us that maybe it was not the instrument he was displeased with but the unreliability of the players. Other music that Mozart wrote for the flute included two Concertos, four quartets with Strings and a Concerto for flute and Harp. 'Mozart's music seems intended to display the powers and personality of the instrument itself, its agility, its ability to combine high speed with spinning out legato melodies'.² All this fantastic sounding flute music from a composer who supposedly disliked the flute.

¹ Galway, James, *Flute*, Kahn and Averill, London, 1982, Page 22

² Ibid. Page 34

Haydn was another composer that was not keen on using the flute in his symphonies. Out of forty-four symphonies during the period 1762 - 1774 only seven of them had a flute scored. After 1780 all of Haydn's remaining symphonies has a least one flute scored and in all of these works the music for the flute is expressive. In contrast to both Mozart and Haydn, Beethoven regarded the flute in an orchestra as indispensable. All of his symphonies had two flutes scored and in his fifth, sixth and ninth Beethoven included an extra piccolo. This is a tradition that has continued and most orchestras, even in the present day, generally use two flutes and a piccolo.

Pierre-Gabriel Buffardin was another influential French flautist and a common and widely accepted presumption is that Bach's famous *A minor Partita for unaccompanied flute* was commissioned especially for him. As well as this famous Partita Bach, a notable pioneer, gave us the *B minor Suite for flute and strings* and several flute sonatas with continuo. Infact the *B minor suite* is so taxing that even for a modern player with a modern flute it remains difficult. France not only gave rise to technical innovations but also to flute virtuosi and a much wider repertoire for the flute. Better flutes led to better players, whose performance encouraged composers to write more advanced and technical pieces. The improving performance of the professional flute players prompted composers to look into something they had previously not done – the flute. They began to write for the flute as a solo instrument and as an orchestral instrument with more solos in the ensemble.

If nineteenth century composers made little use of the flute as a soloist or in chamber music, it was not so much due to their lack of interest as to the predominance of the piano and the string quartet in chamber music, and to the considerable development of

the orchestra in both the symphonic and the operatic fields. The profound changes that came about in the evolution of the tonal system, (that was gradually being regarded as outdated) led composers to favour more restricted forces, revising those of traditional chamber music in favour of more original ensembles, as in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and Debussy's *Sonata for flute, viola and harp*, to mention only the two most famous examples. In this context one is struck by the special fondness modern French composers have for the flute, which has largely contributed to the exploration of new combinations and to a reconsideration of the approach to the instrument, as is borne out by various flute recitals.

'The flute is another very important instrument in primitive cultures. When the earliest flutes perhaps hollow bones, or shells, were animated by human breath the phenomenon was thought to be magical. These natural materials were later fashioned into more elaborate flutes which were used for magic and ritual purposes.'³ This statement could offer an explanation as to why Jolivet, Messiaen and Varèse have found the flute quite a prominent instrument in their music. In the late 1800s more elaborate scores were being written for the flute and these included extended techniques for a flute player such as double and flutter tonguing and this helped to expand the flute's vocabulary. Shortly after this period the flute repertoire was introduced to two of the most evocative pieces ever written for the flute, both by Claude Debussy: *Syrinx* and *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. *Syrinx* is the main piece that all flute players learn to play, it is Debussy's one and only flute solo piece. Debussy got his inspiration from a Greek fable that shows the gods misbehaving in tiresomely human fashion. One of the inceptive works of this new approach, Edgar Varèse's *Density 21.5*, was composed in 1936 and dedicated to Georges Barrère for the inauguration of his platinum flute. In his constant determination

³ Cohn, Arthur, Twentieth Century Music in Western Europe, Philadelphia, 1965, p157

to distance himself from traditional genres, Varèse refers to the specific gravity, or density, of the metal in the title of the work, a short but dense piece in which he exploits the unusual characteristic of the flute: writing a fortissimo in the bottom and middle registers which are naturally less favoured than the treble, and integrating percussive effects by means of the sound of the keys at the beginning of the middle section of the piece. These are typical of the composer's attempt to abolish the frontiers between sound and noise for the sake of what he called 'organised sounds'. In the same way his particular treatment of the flute, from the use of pivotal notes around which the line progressively unfurls from the bass to the treble at the beginning, to the wide leaps in contrasting intensities, almost simulating several instruments, is part of a spatial concept peculiar to Varèse.

Written in the same year as *Density 21.5*, the *Cinq Incantations* by André Jolivet belong to the 'magic and incantatory' spirit of music which also relates to Jolivet's *Mana* (1935) and the *Danses rituelles pour piano* (1939). Attracted by certain extra-European instruments like the ney, a flute of Arab or Turkish origin, Jolivet emphasized the ritualistic aspect of the pieces whose titles bear out the 'primitive expression of human groupings' that fascinated the composer at the time. Where Varèse saw the opportunity for seeking new ways of playing, Jolivet, on the contrary, stresses the fluidity of the discourse of which certain sections are repeated, thanks in particular to the popularisation of short, rhythmic motives, thereby reinforcing its incantatory character. It is in fact this use of repetition, which is both static and evolutionary, that contributes to the spell-like scansion of this music.

Written for the 1951 Paris Conservatoire competition, Olivier Messiaen's *Le Merle Noir* (The Blackbird) is a patent example of the composer's fascination with birdsong, and particularly with one of his favourite birds. It is however, interesting to note that whereas his usual practice is to entrust his stylisations of birdsong either to the piano or to the woodwinds and the keyboard instruments of his orchestra, Messiaen here gives it to the instrument that is the closest to and most evocative of the song of the blackbird. The technical brilliance imposed by the purpose for which it was written appears in the rhythmic complexity and in the progress of the discourse after the introductory cadenza.

The Impact of French and other Predecessors: Debussy and Stravinsky

As with all composers Varèse, Messiaen and Jolivet were influenced by several predecessors of their time. Two of the major influences on these composers were Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky, Debussy of French origin and the latter of Russian origin. Although these two composers influenced Varèse, Messiaen and Jolivet this chapter is exploring the different aspects of their works that were most influential to the individual composer as they all used different approaches to the works of Debussy and Stravinsky.

Varèse

Claude Debussy was the main composer who influenced not just the works but also the lifestyle of Varèse. They met for the first time in 1908, although they had been in touch before this time with Debussy trying to persuade Varèse to stay on at the Conservatoire in Paris. Debussy became the closest composer to Varèse despite an age gap of over twenty years throughout the time they spent together. One aspect of Varèse's musical thinking kept him and Debussy close. Varèse wanted to express the sounds that he could hear in his mind through a creative and expressive process and like Debussy he was eager for new sonorities. Varèse wrote music in which timbre plays a most important role. For Varèse sounds as such were the essential structural components of music, more basic than melody, harmony or rhythm. Although Varèse was classed as a Debussyist when he lived and worked in Paris he attacked Debussy imitators saying 'I am pretty sure that if Debussy returned to the world today, after hearing the Debussyists, he would change his name...The very basis of creative work is irreverence!'⁴ Maybe therefore Varèse did not realise that Debussy is often seen as an important predecessor to his

⁴ Ouellette, Fernand, Edgard Varèse, London, Calder and Boyars, 1973, p146

earlier works. In conversation with Gunther Schuller, Varèse said ‘above all I admired Debussy, primarily for economy of means and clarity, and the intensity he achieved through them, balancing with almost mathematical equilibrium timbres against rhythms and textures-like a fantastic chemist’⁵. This conversation shows that Debussy was not only an influence on the music of Varèse but it also shows the nature of his guidance in the clarity of texture, timbres, rhythmic invention and interaction between the texture and timbre and in his own words he praises the composer Varèse saw Erik Satie as an influence but in a slightly different way to how he perceived other composers. It was an indirect guidance on Varèse that Satie had as he had previously assisted Debussy by broadening his horizons with a move away from the conservatoire; as Parks asserts ‘Satie’s music, and especially his freedom from conventional norms for music may well have influenced Varèse and encouraged his ideas of freedom for music. Satie’s harmony, which, like Debussy’s is free from traditional ideas of antecedence and consequence may have influenced Varèse’s own harmony which is similarly free.’⁶ While he was living in Paris Varèse met many other artists, writers and musicians whose ideas and music may have influenced such as Satie and Rolland. Further afield in Berlin Varèse also came across Richard Strauss of whom he was very fond. Strauss was an important acquaintance as well as a musical influence. It was his use of rhythm, texture and orchestration that Varèse found the most influential.

Varèse was also interested in Igor Stravinsky, and although they did not meet till 1960 they continued to write letters to one another. There is little evidence to suggest that Varèse influence Stravinsky in any way yet there is evidence of Stravinsky’s influence

⁵ Schuller, Gunther, ‘Conversation with Varèse’, Perspectives of new Music, Spring/Summer, 1965, p35

⁶ Parks, Anne, Freedom, Form and Process in Varèse: A study of Varèse’s musical Ideas – their sources, their development, and their use in his works, Cornell University, 1974

on him. Like Stravinsky in *The Rite of Spring*, Varèse aims for a block structure in a sequence of distinct blocks; but where Stravinsky's blocks are usually connected by a continuous pulse, Varèse's music often gains power from the brutal interruptions of one kind of music by another. Stravinsky's influence on Varèse is considerable although the number of Stravinsky's pieces that connects the two is minimal and it is mainly *The Rite of Spring* that is studied in correspondence to *Density 21.5*. According to a conversation between Robert Craft and Stravinsky, Stravinsky stated '...I do know and greatly admire *Ionization*, *Octandre*, *Density 21.5*, and *Intégrales*, and I consider Varèse's present activity – tape recording the sound of New York City – of the highest value, and not merely as documentation, but as material as art.'⁷ This shows how impressed Stravinsky was with some of the works of Varèse and the more acquainted with the works he became the more he was impressed. *The Rite of Spring* influenced Varèse's *Ionization* (1931) as the sounds he used had already been heard in 1913 when he heard Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Stravinsky was a far more performed artist than Varèse throughout his lifetime, which can explain the influence of Stravinsky on Varèse and not vice versa. Overall Stravinsky represents the mainstream of modern music in Varèse's lifetime.

Varèse also acknowledged his debt to Mozart. Varèse's *Density 21.5* achieves a purity that Mozart had previously captured, even though the conception of song that animates it is at the antipodes of Mozart's. In Mozart, within the song the cry portrays a piercing explosion, where as with Varèse, the cry becomes the main substance of the song.

⁷ Stravinsky, Igor and Robert Craft, Memories and Commentaries, New York, Doubleday and Company Inc, 1960, p96

Messiaen

It was at a young age that Messiaen was in touch with the magic realm of opera and recent French music. As gifts he received copy's of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte* and Debussy's *Estampes* with Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and these informed Messiaen's early taste in music before his own musical career began. For Messiaen it is Stravinsky and his *Rite of Spring* that is the most obvious ancestor as a master of rhythmic propulsion and formal discontinuity whilst the unresolved diatonic chords with added notes of his harmonic style are clearly influenced by earlier French composers such as Debussy and Ravel. Messiaen's use of the whole tone scale is found in much of his music but tends to go unnoticed as he avoids emphasising it due to the scale being an important feature of Debussy's music. Messiaen needed a diversity of techniques to write his birdsongs that began in the 1930s, including tonal, atonal, key centered and modal, irregular and repetitive. Messiaen was very similar to Stravinsky in that they shared similar musical and aesthetic views on several issues of their lives. Even in old age Messiaen became a kind of historic monument, just as Stravinsky had done several years before. Echoes and pre-echoes of Messiaen's style can be heard in the works of several composers including Stravinsky and Debussy making him an important influence on composers throughout the twentieth century. Messiaen continued the line of great writers of French *mélodies* and in these he shows the influence of Debussy in his use of the natural inflections of the language. Messiaen's interest in nature and birdsong followed on from composers before him and their individual interests influencing some of their works: Debussy and his interest in wind, water and clouds and Berlioz's interest in mountains. In Messiaen's *Préludes* there is reference to Debussy that is inescapable. Sometimes the similarities are so close that it seems that

Messiaen is quoting Debussy's own Prelude *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*. Messiaen's rhythm appears to be very similar to Debussy's with his own preference being for repetition and symmetrical shapes. Messiaen follows the same steps as Debussy by speeding up the time period that portrayed daybreak and midday and then simultaneously slowing the piece down to make it more playable and recognisable. Messiaen did this interference with time to help him concentrate on what he describes as 'ornithologically interesting'.⁸ Messiaen believed that the only real music that could be heard was in the sounds of nature and he saw transcribing nature to music as a creative activity;

It is clear also that the notion of copying nature is a justification for creative activity for him as it was for Debussy, or as it has been for musicians in other cultures, for birdsong imitations are not infrequent among the developed musical traditions of eastern music.⁹

Messiaen was so impressed with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* that not only did it influence his own compositions but was also a cornerstone of Messiaen's analytical teaching. Messiaen analysed *The Rite of Spring* for a long and thorough time focusing on the rhythmic characters. After defining these rhythmic characters Messiaen then went on to use the same ideas in several of his pieces. He believed they contributed to the 'magical power' of the piece.¹⁰ Messiaen explained his theories of his rhythmic research to several composers and by doing this influenced Varèse, Jolivet and also Boulez. One of the most fundamental features of Messiaen's rhythms is that they are ametrical, something that can also be found in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Messiaen's *Les Offrandes oubliées* shows a greater influence of Stravinsky than of Debussy. The second movement is reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* following a system of expansion and contraction of rhythmic cells. Messiaen saw

⁸ Griffiths, Paul, Olivier Messiaen and the music of time, London, Faber and Faber, 1985, p181

⁹ Ibid. p188

¹⁰ Samuel, Claude, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, London, Stainer and Bell, p37.

Stravinsky's use of rhythm as a central aspect of his works and often used this to help his own music, for example the octatonic scale is evident in some of Messiaen's earlier works. In his orchestral pieces Messiaen follows a practise of taking the strings away from their normal ambiguous role, a practice that had been previously adopted by composers such as Stravinsky and Varèse. Messiaen derived his cellular rhythmic procedures from Stravinsky.

Jolivet

At the young age of fourteen Jolivet discovered two composers who were to become a major influence on him. These were Debussy and Ravel. Nearly ten years later Jolivet attended a concert held by Schoenberg and it was whilst listening to his music that he heard his first exposure to atonal music. It was in 1928 that Varèse became Jolivet's spiritual mentor as Jolivet's music teacher at that time felt that they shared the same characteristic of being independently minded. Over the following three years with Varèse by his side 'he took part in acoustic research, learnt about the transmutation of sound and density cells, became aware of the relevance of astronomical laws for musical structures, committed himself to a non-tonal method distinct from dodecaphonic serialism, and was deeply involved in the application of metaphysical thought to music.'¹¹ All of the studies mentioned above that Jolivet undertook was of interest to Messiaen, Varèse and Debussy but none of these composers spent a great deal of time working on them. Varèse became one of the most influential composers to Jolivet throughout the years they spent together although this was cut short due to Varèse's move to America. Jolivet credits Varèse with helping him to understand music 'as a magical and ritual expression'.¹² Although this is what Varèse tried to do he also

¹¹ Schiffer, Brigitte, 'Andrè Jolivet (1905-1975)' *Tempo*, No112, 1975 p13

¹² Cohn, Arthur, *Twentieth Century Music*, p157

schooled him in Schoenbergian techniques, which is visible in Jolivet's atonal melodies and highly motivic. After Varèse's move it was to be Messiaen's chance to mentor Jolivet and this began in 1931 shortly after Messiaen heard Jolivet's *Trois Temps pour Piano* written in 1930. On hearing this piece Messiaen gave Jolivet exceptional credit as a composer. Messiaen was influential on Jolivet and as they became friends it followed that they had similar interests in spiritual and religious matters. *Cinq Incantations* draws on different aspects of other composers music including *Le Sacre* by Stravinsky, *Syrinx* by Debussy and *Density 21.5* by Varèse as Mawer asserts;

Christian allusion is at least implicit in the second and fourth pieces; 'serene communion' also suggests commonalty with Messiaen and the celebration of the earth's fecundity a spiritual kinship with Stravinsky's *Le Sacre*. 'Incantation' denotes a ritualised recitation of magical text, as in the creation of a spell and, beyond this, the work exists within the rich tradition of solo flute writing: Debussy's *Syrinx* (1910), Honegger's *Danse de la chèvre* (1921) and Varèse's *Density 21.5* of the same year, 1936.¹³

Also similar to Messiaen's techniques is the relation of music and text, with titles of each movement providing information about the music. One of the most common aspects of *Cinq Incantations* that maps out similarities with *Density 21.5* is the extreme use of the range of the flute. Both composers use this technique often in close juxtaposition. Messiaen also uses this technique in *Le merle noir* but not to the extent that Jolivet and Varèse have.

¹³ Mawer, Deborah, 'The search for a voice: Spiritual 'Otherness' in the Early Music (1935-39) of André Jolivet' given at conference: 'Nationalism and Identity in Third Republic France' Keele University, 6-8th July 2001

Beyond Music

This chapter consists of analyses of Varèse's *Density 21.5*, Messiaen's *Le Merle Noir* and Jolivet's *Cinq Incantations*. It will look at the themes surrounding the works, different structures and rhythms along with a step by step close analysis.

Varèse

Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5* comes equipped with footnotes to give a general explanation as to how it should be performed. It includes a description of the title explaining that 21.5 is the density of platinum and that the piece of music was written at the request of Georges Barrere for the inauguration of his platinum flute. Since Varèse composed and published this piece of flute music the density of platinum has actually changed to 21.45. Varèse also footnoted that *Density 21.5* should always be played in strict time and that the metronomic indication should be closely followed. There is also an instruction on how to play the notes at the bottom of page one that are marked with a +. This tells the players, before they even pick up the flute exactly how Varèse intended the piece to be performed.

Density 21.5 is a short piece of music that consists of only 61 bars yet in such a short space it also includes three different time signatures. In twenty-three of these bars the time signature is justified by a long or accented note. Twenty bars include a tie over the bar lines and eleven bars have rests as the first beat. With the signature changes comes an accented figure at the beginning of the bar. This creates a metre that works as a notational device throughout the work. Dynamic change was an important structural element in Varèse's music as opposed to its mere use as decoration. Throughout *Density 21.5* there are few occasions where the dynamic stays stable and this could be due to the variations in sonority that he was trying to achieve from a single instrument. The range

of dynamics varies from *pp* to *fff* and includes some *sfp*'s for extra clarity. Within each bar of music Varèse generally varies the dynamics by crescendo or other means such as dramatic change. It is the five bars in the middle of the piece that are the most stable – the dynamics do not exceed *mp*. This is due to the extended technique that Varèse includes in the music. Within the footnote it is explained that the notes marked + are to be played softly, hitting the keys at the same time to produce a percussive effect.

The following table shows the different sections and sub sections:

| Section | Sub section | Bar Numbers | Description |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| A | A | 1-23 | Beginning theme |
| | B | 24-28 | Minor Third |
| B | C | 29-32 | Minor Second |
| | D | 33-36 | Minor Third |
| | E | 37-40 | Minor Second |
| A | A1 | 41-45 | Variation of beginning theme |
| | B1 | 46-50 | Minor Third |
| | F | 51-61 | Coda |

Density 21.5 resembles the sonata form ABA quite clearly. Its three sections could be described as the exposition, development and recapitulation as the whole piece is divided into three sections that are each based on the same material. Each section can also be divided into subsections. The first section (bars 1-28) can be split into two sub sections. The first subsection is the main theme of the piece and is based mainly around the minor second of the opening phrase. The second subsection is only 5 bars long, contains only 6 pitches C#, D, E, G#, D', Eb' and is based on a minor third. The percussive effect of the fingers on the flute keys for 5 bars is the only place in *Density 21.5* where Varèse uses this new technique for the instrument. The second section can

be divided into three subsections all at a generally higher pitch than the first section. The three subsections are based on a minor second (bars 29-32), a minor third (bars 33-36) and the last subsection is a transition, again based on a minor second (bars 37-40). The third main section can be divided into three subsections. The first is the same phrase as that which opened the piece, the second is based on a minor third and is similar to the second subsection of the first main section. The third subsection is a type of coda with extracts of similar events that have been heard earlier in the piece. Nattiez exemplifies this:

This ending is thus a *résumé* of all that precedes: the falls of bars 51 and 52, the play of permutations, the progression on G then A and B and the final flight are all procedures encountered previously.¹⁴

Varèse uses a rise to the higher pitches at the end to create a climatic point more so than when the higher pitches are heard in the middle of the piece.

Messiaen

It is widely known that Olivier Messiaen collected bird songs for many years throughout his life. He has drawn attention to his use of bird song by stressing their authenticity. One point that listeners and performers alike should remember is that these are Messiaen's birds and others may interpret them differently. Bird songs differ from human music in many respects. One must always consider that bird song is generally higher pitched and birds sing at a faster pace. This sometimes removes the authenticity surrounding Messiaen's music as the pitch and pace coupled with the tessitura means that we do not actually hear the bird song as it is out of our hearing range. Transcribing bird song is also made difficult, as birds do not stick to a beat so there is no regularity and is rarely metronomically precise. 'Messiaen's nightingale gives the impression of

¹⁴ Nattiez, Jean-Jacques, 'Varèse's Density 21.5: A study in semiological analysis', Music Analysis, 1982

being not a living, flesh and blood bird, but a mechanical toy, like the Emperor's nightingale in Stravinsky's opera.¹⁵ The question that this poses to many critics is 'Is this what Messiaen was trying to do?' The answer changes depending on the critics' opinion of his music but many are favouring the answer 'No'. An important point regarding bird song is that it defies western conceptions regarding pitch, since, in general it is not comprised of a succession of steady identifiable pitches, which can be notated on the staff, but rather include a variety of microtonal inflections, which not only affect pitch, but also the general timbre, defying western notation.

Le merle Noir, written for flute and piano was one of Messiaen's first portraits of a bird. The blackbird features in many of his bird songs but this is the only full solo blackbird piece. *Le merle Noir* is a fairly short piece that is symptomatic of the composer's increasing interest in transcribing natural bird song. Within the piece there is no particular atmosphere created due to blackbirds living in so many different habitats, and this can explain the melodic style, as it is simply a lone blackbird.

Le merle Noir is divided into three sections, the second being a slightly extended variation of the first which is followed by a coda. Both the first and second section can be divided up into six sub-sections:

| | Bars | |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|
| | A | A1 |
| 1, Piano atmosphere | 1-3 | 44-46 |
| 2, Bird cadenza | 3-8 | 46-53 |
| 3, Combined song | 9-26 | 54-71 |
| 4, Expanded octaves | 27-29 | 72-75 |
| 5, Chords and silent bar | 29-35 | 76-82 |

¹⁵ Hold, Trevor, 'Messiaen's Birds', Music and Letters, April 1971, Page 116

The first sub section is identical in both A and A1. The first aspect of this piece that we notice is that there is no time or key signature. The dynamics within each bar of the first bird cadenza cover the whole dynamic range available to the flute. That is they range from *ppp* to *fff*. It also calls upon the technique of flutter tonguing to be used to give the effect of a bird's trill. Both bars 3-8 and 46-53 have short extracts of music that circle around the same few pitches. The main differences between the two sections are the number of pitch classes that Messiaen uses. In A he uses eleven out of the twelve yet in A1 he uses all twelve including *Bb* that was omitted in A. the technique of chromaticism that Messiaen uses is one that adds colour and structure. In an interview he stated

Colour comes from a choice of chromaticism. If you play a cluster, you play all the notes at once and there are no colours. You get grey or black – colours are absent. To produce colours you must suppress something. For example if you're wearing, say, a yellowy-orange sweater, that colour absorbs certain rays and reflects others. It's the same with a chord: if you have 11 notes out of the 12 or ten notes out of the 12, that produces a colour.¹⁷

In the combined song from bar 54 onwards the flute expands its range to the lower register for the first time in the piece. It is at this point that the flute joins the piano to produce a canonic style of music.

The music moves through many different styles, there is monodic bird song, question and answer between flute and piano, accompanied melody and even canonic writings. In the coda the flute and piano swap roles. It is the piano that becomes dominant in the rhythm, attack and twelve-note serialism yet the flute continues, oblivious to this, with the similar bird song like material that has been heard before. Bars 91 – 120 see Messiaen's employment of twelve-note serialism to determine the piano's order of pitches. The usage is strict over all 30 bars, which is something that Messiaen was not

¹⁶ Nichols, Roger 'Messiaen's 'Le merle Noir' The case of a blackbird in a historical pie', The Musical Times, 1988(Dec), Page 648

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 649

keen on doing and had rarely employed in his other music. The highest note that the flute plays is C^{'''} and this not only concludes a small flourish but also the entire piece. To make an even more dramatic conclusion it is governed by an ubiquitous tritone. It employs the same strategy adopted for the B^{'''} at the very end of *Density 21.5* and helps the piece to remain in the mind of the listener.

To conclude it is worth quoting a superb comment by Roger Nichols, which to flautists and academics of flute music, is self-explanatory:

This mixture of organisational subtlety with a childlike delight in manipulating high and low, so characteristic of Messiaen's best music, may to some degree explain why *Le merle noir* continues to be loved and performed by the flute playing fraternity; and if in its compositional techniques it looks forward, it looks back, in sheer expressive 'flautatiousness', to predecessors like Faure's *Fantaisie*.¹⁸

Jolivet

Andr  Jolivet considered the flute to be preeminently suited to his purposes of acoustics and orchestration. He liked the sound of the flute and linked it close to nature and after the human voice thought it the most natural instrument, being able to express deep feelings that connect us together.

Cinq Incantations, written in the same year as *Density 21.5* by Var se, tackles many different subjects and issues: the death of his mother, the birth of his son, the disagreement with Var se and the acquaintances with particular friends. The idea was to express melody, harmonic progression, rhythm, intensity and pitch to more sensitive listeners in order to provide musical emotion. There is a strong sense of repetition throughout the incantations, notably in the first and third. The fifth incantation has several repeats of the introductory formula, each one increasing the dynamics and speed

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 650

of the original. Each individual title indicates their magical intention and Jolivet has attempted to derive their form from their purposes.

The first incantation, *Pour accueillir les négociateurs et que pentrevue soit pacifique* (To welcome the negotiators and in order that the meeting be peaceful) shapes a moment of solemn ceremony drawing on the flute's entire range to create two distinctive voices. The extreme low register renders loud, gong-like percussions of low C while the high voice calls out in piercing surges of chant, made distinctive by the use of flutter tonguing. Jolivet also makes the distinction prominent by writing the lower voice in 3/4 metre and the upper voice in 9/8 metre. The tonguing also separates the two voices as the lower voice uses just conventional tonguing while the higher voice is entirely flutter tongued. There are also no overlaps of the pitches used for the two voices creating a big sound distinction. As with Varèse's *Density 21.5* the pitch ranges from low C to D''''', the main differences being that Jolivet is musically and technically braver and does this at the beginning in close conjunction of each other (Bars 1-2) going a step further than Varèse.

The opening two bars, which introduce the "dialogue" section, announce the difficulty of the composition by requiring the flautist to slur from a third-octave D marked *forte* to a fourth octave D marked *piano* (crescendoing to *fortissimo*) and then to jump down to low C maintaining the *fortissimo* dynamic. The unusual rhythm of low C in the second bar foreshadows the rhythmic complexity to come in the remainder of the composition.¹⁹

As suggested by the title of this first incantation the interview ends peacefully with sustained notes played with a natural sound with no vibrato.

The second incantation, *Pour que l'enfant qui va naitre soit un fils* (In order that the child to be born is a son) similarly utilises the contrast of two elements, one percussive and the other providing melodic outbursts to build an intense trance. The overall form of this movement has no closed musical pattern making it slightly

¹⁹ Kremler, K, 'Is there magic in Jolivet's Music, [The Music Review](#), 1983, Vol 44 Page 126-127

amorphous. The rhythmic element of this incantation is a series of quintuplet rhythms on the pitches *Eb* or *D*, which resemble heartbeats. It begins the piece and frequently appears throughout. The melodic element is a demisemiquaver figure that is repeated throughout the piece in various variations and forms but are always on the pitches *Db*, *Fb*, *D* and *Eb*. The piece has no definite form as the quintuplets do not reappear after the first two thirds of the piece and when they are present they vary in lengths and patterns. From bar 60 onwards there is a build up to the climatic high *B* that represents the birth of the child. An increasing ferocity and rise in pitch displays this after the movement has conveyed both anxiety and exhilaration of high suspense. This movement is about the mystery of motherhood and ends with a battle cry of primordial feminine power and joy.

The third incantation, *Pour que la moisson soit riche qui naita des sillons que le laboureur trace* (In order that the harvest to be born of the ploughman's furrows be rich), makes use of multiple repetitions of a single chant-like melody with continuously varied nuance, developing a sustained, magnetic trance-induction for this fertility rite. The tempo of this incantation extremely slow and comes with instructions at the beginning telling the player that it needs to be performed 'very regular, not without heaviness, but without brutality'. The whole piece only consists of nine bars but they are very long and the element of repetition within them is important. The first bar is based around the note *D* with grace notes of *C* and *C sharp* and this motif returns in bars 5, 8 and 9 and the other bars are repetitions of the musical idea introduced in bar 2. This helps to create a monotonous and fairly hypnotic effect and with the pitches not going to the extreme it has a relaxing effect. This incantation is a simple prayer, concerning crop growth, which has been around for centuries.

In the fourth incantation, *Pour une communion sereine de l'etre avec le monde* (for a serene communication of being with the world), we hear Jolivet's heartfelt call to the cosmic spirit within the human. This luminous, arching prayer brings the work to a deeply moving climax. This incantation can be divided into five smaller sections. Section one, bars 1-11; Section two, bars 12-15; Section three, bars 16-22; Section four, bars 23-29; and section five, bars 30-35. Sections two and four differ from the rest separating different types of activities that the piece portrays. Section two is based on an augmented octave between C and C sharp and the flutter tonguing that this section uses helps to draw attention to these pitches. Section four is the climatic section where is mainly based around high E that are repeated and introduced by chromatic runs making them stand out. Section five serves as a recapitulation to the whole piece by using the opening melody that featured in section one. 'Within the structure, there is the being who becomes cognisant of his individual existence (bars 12-15) and of his inherent role in the worldly force that dominates him.'²⁰

In the fifth incantation, *Aux funérailles du chef pour obtenir la protection de son ame* (at the funeral of the chief – to gain protection for his soul), death is not lamented, on the contrary an enormous life force is set against it. Here we hear not the voice of self-pity but an ever-increasing affirmation of life, of pain, of death. This incantation is similar to number two by having only a few pitches and patterns. Jolivet experiments with variations of the rhythm of the melody line to break the monotonous repetition. There is also an alternation of tempo from crotchet = 88 to crotchet = 58-63 helping the repetition to vary slightly. Although this movement was meant to accompany a funeral it is one of the liveliest movements of the five incantations. The G sharp on which the middle section is based, builds up an expanding field of energy around itself,

²⁰ Kremler, K, Ibid., Page 132

conquering all evil. A beam of music penetrates the wall between life and death and surrounds the world as if with a protective coat.

For three entirely different pieces the similarities between them are amazing. All three composers use the extensive note range of the flute in a short space of time, helping the music to progress more than it had in previous centuries. *Density 21.5*, *Le merle noir* and *Cinq Incantations* were all written to portray certain subjects helping to make them individual. If Varèse, Messiaen and Jolivet had all composed music on the same subject the outcome would have still been completely different as various aspects influence each composer. Varèse used the density of platinum to help compose flute music for an instrument made of that material. By using an extensive note range and extreme dynamics he was merely producing a piece that not only shows off his expertise but also that of the player. Messiaen had less of a choice as he was transcribing sounds that already exist. Of course he was limited due to the range of notes a flute can produce as birds usually sing at a higher pitch than any man made instrument. Jolivet focused his music on various themes and moods so different pitches are connected to different moods within his music. In their pieces all three composers also use an enormous range of dynamics often moving from *pp* to *fff* in the space of a few bars. Messiaen is the only composer not to use a key or time signature at the beginning of his music, mainly due to the fact that birds do not sing to a strict time signature so it is almost impossible to transcribe them into a restricted beat. Although Varèse uses a time signature at the beginning of his piece he also changes it several times throughout the piece. With his use of notes being tied over the bar lines and rests constantly occurring it is often impossible to detect exactly which time signature he has put his music in. Jolivet is successful in conveying a mysterious and incantatory quality in his music yet he does not quite achieve the magical aspect that he was looking for. Both Messiaen and Jolivet

use the idea of flutter tonguing to portray musical ideas and to make them more powerful. Varèse used a more percussive method that was a new technique to the twentieth century and helped make his music different to other composers'. Jolivet was more challenging with his music and use of pitch yet all three composers were successful.

Conclusion

Edgard Varèse, Olivier Messiaen and André Jolivet all had an enormous impact on the musical world of the twentieth century. In their own individual ways each composer added new techniques and meanings to French music. The flute music that has been analysed in this thesis are pieces that were composed within a short space of each other and all share similarities but also contrast one another. Although the same composers throughout some of their musical career influenced Varèse, Messiaen and Jolivet they also influenced each other, which gives a reason as to why their music contained so many similar aspects. One of the main points that needs to be reiterated throughout this thesis is that at the time of writing *Density 21.5*, Varèse had emigrated to America. He is generally classed as an American composer of French origin yet his work is full of French traits that he took with him to America.

Density 21.5 is one of Varèse's most famous compositions and is a popular piece chosen by flautist's to perform. Messiaen's *Le merle noir* is not so popular. It is on the Associated Board's Performance certificate list for flute players due to how difficult it is to master. Experts rarely discuss it, perhaps because it was his first experimental bird song and the others that followed have proved more popular. *Cinq Incantations* are five specialised pieces that are hard to conquer but are important to Jolivet as each symbolised different aspects of his life and a flute player picks up on this portrayal when performing them.

Further study of Varèse's, Messiaen's and Jolivet's thoughts, opinions and music would be aided by all their interviews, lectures and books being translated and published in English. Not much study appears to have been done in English, to date, on André Jolivet so resources are limited making some parts of his musical career hard to follow. Many questions, which continue the work of this dissertation, remain to be answered. The study in this thesis is aimed at making readers aware of the flute music of three amazing French composers of the twentieth century and to give them a knowledge of three specific compositions. If this work has succeeded in its purpose then it, above all, will enable listeners to speed up the process of understanding Varèse's *Density 21.5*, Messiaen's *Le merle noir* and Jolivet's *Cinq Incantations* by directing their attention to influences and significant features of their works.

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